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# COMPASSION IN CLINICAL SPACES

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NO CONFLICTS OF INTEREST TO DISCLOSE

**“UNRAVELING THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF EMPATHY & COMPASSION:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENTS FOR BRAIN DISORDERS AND HUMAN WELL-BEING**

**NATIONAL ACADEMIES OF SCIENCES, ENGINEERING, AND MEDICINE WORKSHOP**

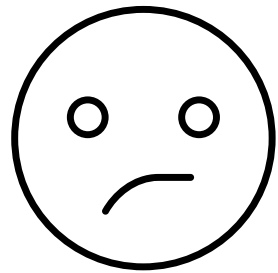
**MAY 21, 2025**



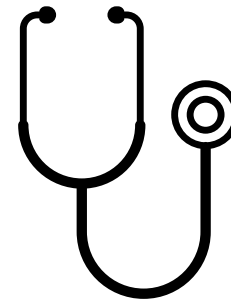
# OBJECTIVES

- Overview of compassion in healthcare
- How does neurobiology and psychology inform developing compassion in the healthcare workforce?

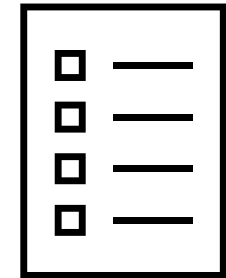
# PATIENT INTERACTION



Chief  
concern

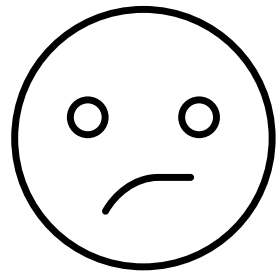


History &  
Physical

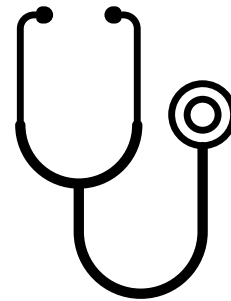


Assessment  
& Plan

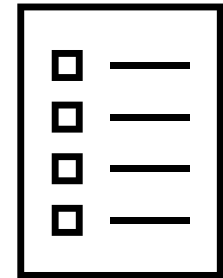
# OPPORTUNITY FOR COMPASSION



Identify  
Suffering

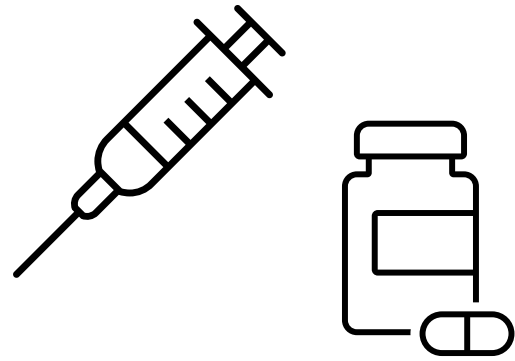


Explore  
underlying  
cause

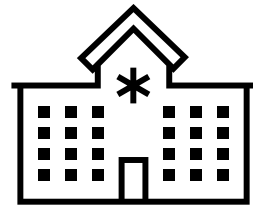


Take action  
to alleviate

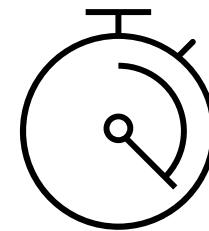
# COMPASSION AND HEALTHCARE OUTCOMES



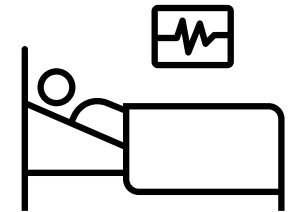
- Lessens need for sedation and decreases response to painful stimuli (Egbert 1963, Sarinopoulos 2013)



- Decreases inappropriate use of healthcare resources (Redelmeier 1995)



- Associated with shorter visit times (Beach 2021)



- Patient rating of compassion strongly correlates with quality of care (Boss 2024)

**Egbert 1963.** The value of a preoperative visit with an anesthetist. JAMA 185(7):553-5. **Sarinopoulos 2013.** Patient-centered interviewing is associated with decreased responses to painful stimuli: an initial fMRI study, PEC 90(2):220-5. **Beach 2021.** Clinician response to patient emotion: impact on subsequent communication and visit length. Ann Fam Med 19(6):515-20. **Redelmeier 1995.** A randomized trial of compassionate care for the homeless in an emergency department. Lancet 345(8959):1131-4. **Boss 2024.** What role does compassion have on quality care ratings? A regression analysis and validation of the SCQ in emergency department patients. BMC Emergency Medicine, 24(1):124.

# COMPASSION GAP IN PRACTICE

Only

- 53% of patients,
- 58% of physicians

Said that the health care system generally provides compassionate care

Out of 800 hospitalized patients, and 510 physicians

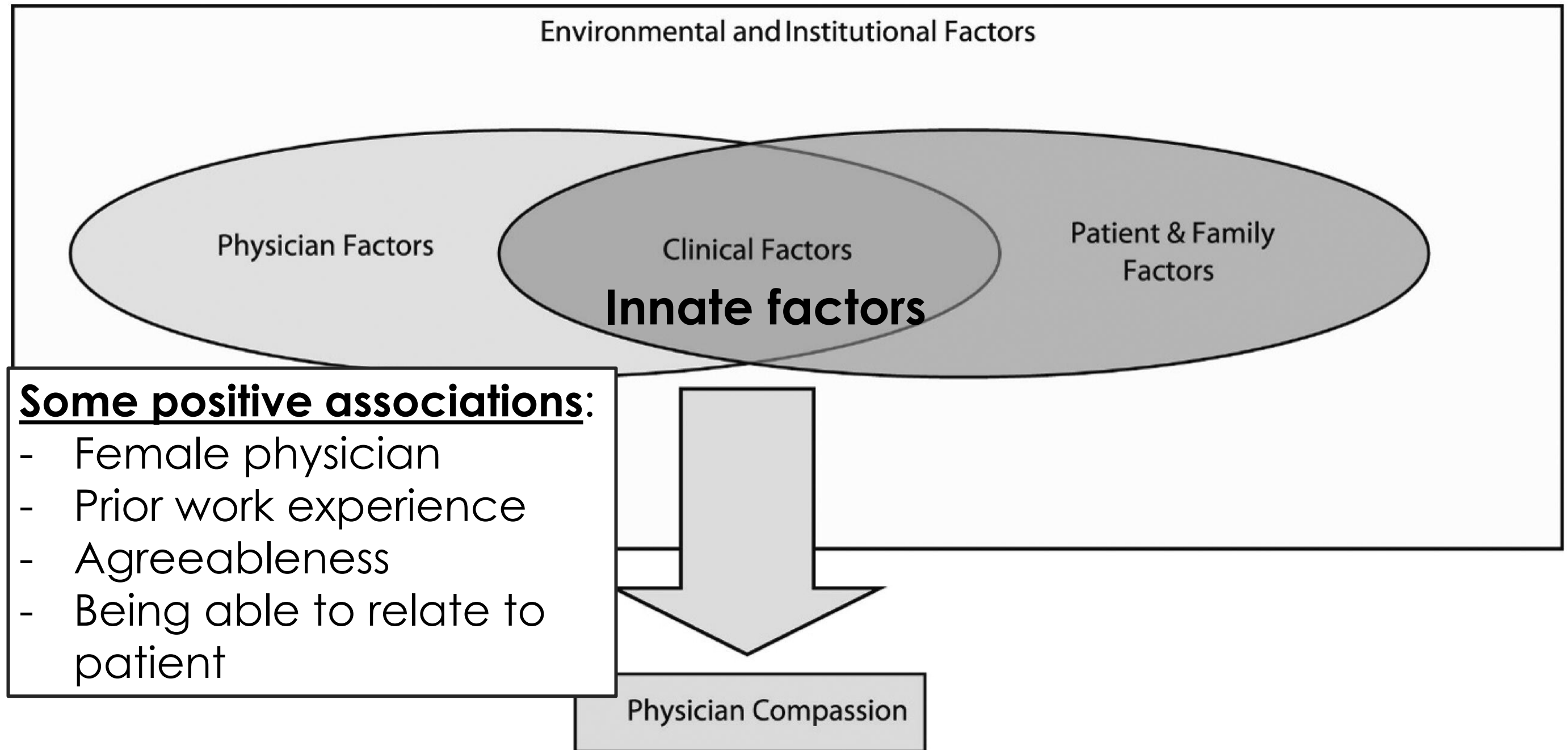
Lown BA, et al. 2011. An agenda for improving compassionate care: a survey shows about half of patients say such care is missing. Health Affairs 30(9): 1772-1778.

# MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMPASSION

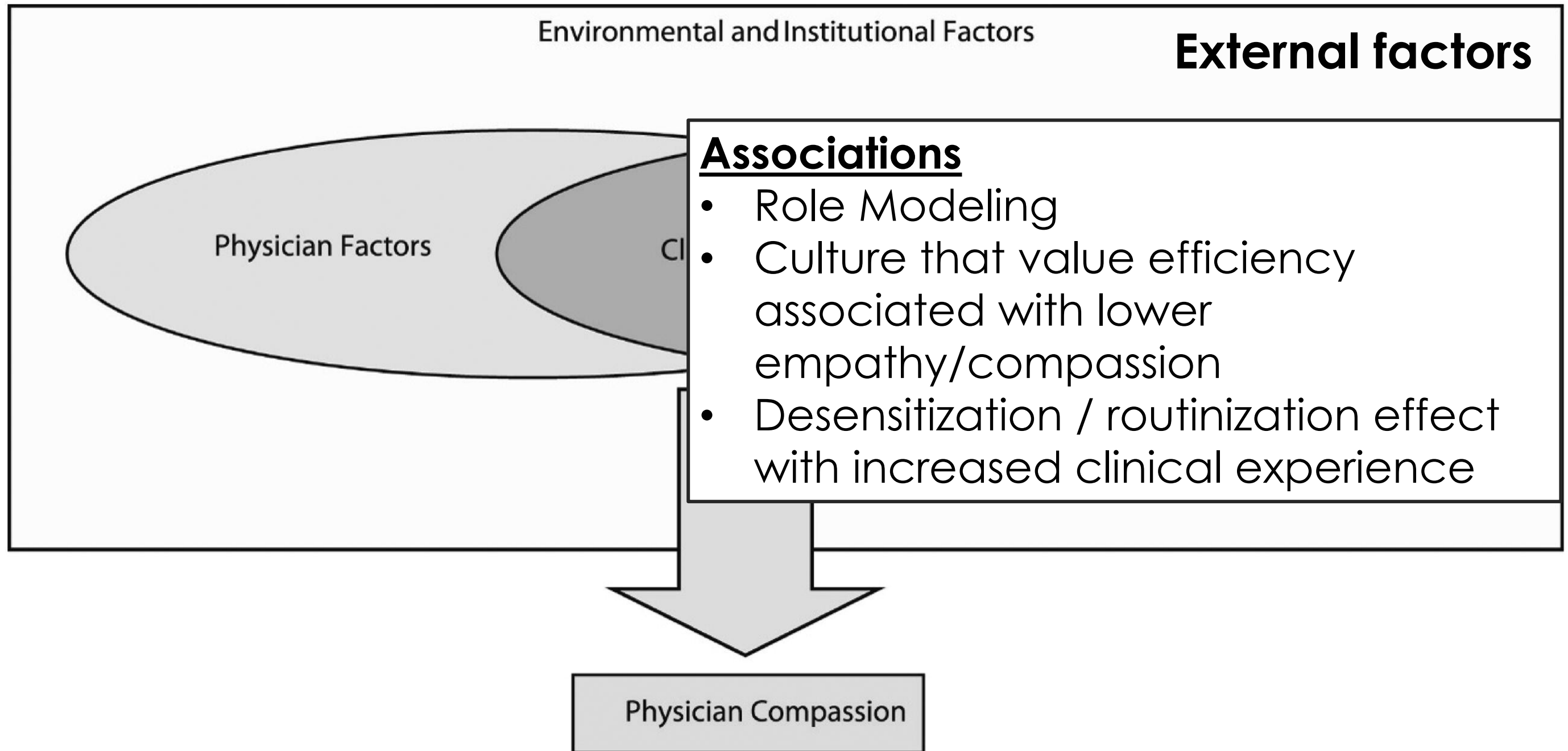
- How often do physicians respond to patient clues about condition?
  - 38% of surgical based visits
  - 21% in primary care visits
- 116 routine visits
  - 54 PCP, 62 surgical, community-based practices in Colorado & Oregon in 1997

Levinson W, Gorawara-Bhat R, Lamb J. A study of patient clues and physicians responses in primary care and surgical settings. JAMA 2000; 284(8):1021-7.





Fernando AT, Consedine, NS. Beyond compassion fatigue: the transactional model of physician compassion. J Pain Symptom Manag. 2014;48(2):292. doi: 10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2013.09.014. Wang CXY, et al. Predictors of Medical Students' Compassion and Related Constructs: A systematic Review. Teaching and Learning in Medicine, 2022;35:502-513.



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# APPRAISAL OF SUFFERING

## Suffering Recognized



Adapted from Fig 1 in Goetz JL, Keltner D, Simon-Thomas E. Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review. Psych Bulletin, 2010, 136(3):351-374

# BURNOUT AND COMPASSION

## Empathy

- Empathy decline in medical school – particularly when starting clinical training (Neumann 2011)

## Burnout

- Emotional Exhaustion
- **Depersonalization**
- Lack of sense of personal achievement
- Nearly half of all medical students experience burnout during school (IsHak 2013)
- 50% of internists reported feeling burned out in 2024 (Medscape 2024)

## Compassion Fatigue

- Emotional and physical exhaustion due to chronic stress of caring for patients who are suffering
- Characterized by exhaustion, anger and irritability, negative coping behaviors, lack of enjoyment or satisfaction with work, reduced ability to make decisions and care for patients
- Incidence – 7-40% (van Mol 2015)

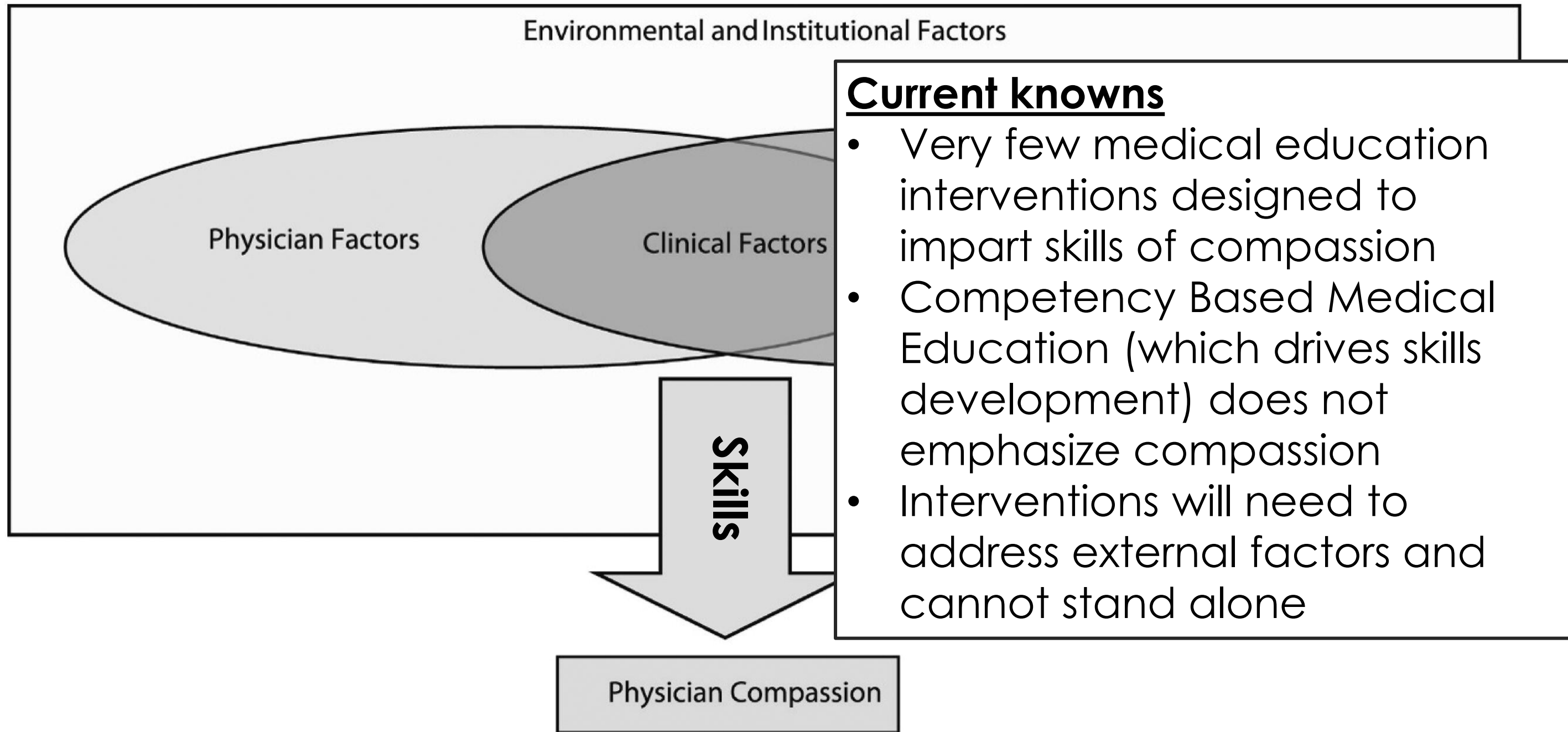
**Cocker F, Joss N. 2016.** Compassion fatigue among healthcare, emergency and community service workers: a systematic review. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 13(6):618. **van Mol MMC, et al. 2015.** The prevalence of compassion fatigue and burnout among healthcare professionals in intensive care units: a systematic review. PLoS ONE 10(8):e0136955. **IsHak W, et al. 2013** Burnout in medical students: a systematic review. Clin Teacher 10(4):242-245.

# APPRAISAL OF SUFFERING

## Suffering Recognized







**Fernando AT, Consedine, NS.** Beyond compassion fatigue: the transactional model of physician compassion. *J Pain Symptom Manag.* 2014;48(2):292. doi: 10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2013.09.014. **Sinclair S, et al. 2021.** What is the state of compassion education? A systematic review of compassion training in health care. *Acad Med.* 96(7): 1057-1070. **Sinclair S, Kondejewski J, Jaggi P, et al.** What works for whom in compassion training programs offered to practicing healthcare providers: a realist review. *BMC Med Educ.* 2021;21:455.

# OPTIMIZING THE ECOSYSTEM OF COMPASSION

- **Neurobiology informs healthy ecosystem**
  - Definition and differentiation between empathy (“I feel you”) and compassion (action to alleviate)
    - especially when frequently encountering suffering
  - Compassion can be developed as a skill set
  - Individuals need to have the resources to cope / help

# FRAMEWORK

**Awareness**

**Embodiment**

**Common  
Humanity**

**Humility**

**Action**

- Awareness: Non-judgmental awareness (and acceptance) of what is present
- Embodiment: Being in tune to our body and integrating thoughts/feelings into action
- Common Humanity: Recognizing that every single being has an experience on earth that is unique and valuable
- Humility: Balanced or accurate perspective about ourselves and others
- Action: Skillful action, reaction vs responding

## **Example Interventions in Clinic**

- Daily huddle with few minutes of mindfulness and discussion
- Clinical reasoning – from problem focused → what is going well?
- Visit length that supports learner and patient needs
- Debrief on being in tune to body during difficult encounters
- Active listening



# FUTURE IMPORTANT DIRECTIONS

- Compassion measured / optimized in clinical settings
  - Patient AND Provider
  - Compassion satisfaction as an area of opportunity

Thank you!

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